ELIZABETH AND MARY, WAITING EXPECTANTLY
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Psalm 85
Luke 1:26–45

"Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry,
'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'"
Luke 1:41b–42 (NRSV)

Advent is rehearsal time. Advent prepares us for the joyful task of joining with all creation
and singing in the reign of Jesus Christ. . . . . So pull out the Gospel of Luke and read
the first few chapters in the weeks before Christmas. Or, get a recording of Handel's *Messiah*
and play it and sing along—if not out loud, then in your heart of hearts:
"For unto us a child is born, a son is given."
Practice singing the light and warmth of Christ into every dark corner of this world:
In the million-mile-long shopping lines, in the life of a child who has to believe that Santa Claus
is the sole reason for the season, in a hurting world torn apart by division. . . .
Sing expectantly of him who is King of kings and Lord of Lords! . . . .
Belt it out with confidence: "And he shall reign forever and ever."

Heidi Husted Armstrong
Singing in the Reign

In this season of waiting, give us moments of quiet
Settle us down in the middle of our hurrying to get everything done.
Open our hearts, touch our hearts with the beauty of the music,
the excitement of anticipation, the laughter of children, the love of dear ones.
Help us to wait, intentionally, for the coming of love: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On each Sunday of Advent, it is the custom here and in many, if not most, churches, to invite a family or member of the congregation to light one of the four candles in the Advent wreath, one for each Sunday. It is a visible reminder that this is the season of preparation, of getting ready for something that hasn't happened yet, a season of waiting expectantly.

As we made arrangements for our Advent wreath this year, I remembered a vignette from a book by Eileen Lindner, *Thus Far on the Way*. Eileen is a good friend of mine, a Presbyterian minister, a mother, a tireless advocate and activist on behalf of children, and a very funny person.

Eileen writes:

> When I was ordained some thirty years ago very few women were ordained in the Presbyterian church. The pulpit robe company didn't make women's pulpit robes so my home church had a robe made for me. Anyway, it was Christmastime. I wore my fancy robe (for the first time). I was a little full of myself. It was an Advent service and we had an Advent wreath. I called a young girl to light the candles in the Advent wreath, and I did what pastors do. I gave her exceedingly exact directions. I said to her: "When the time comes, I'll nod. You come down, light the candle, then turn, blow out the match without blowing out the candle, and go sit down."

The time came. "I nodded, she came down and did exactly as I told her, and as I moved over to the Advent wreath, she said in a very clear voice, 'Careful, Reverend, don't set your bathrobe on fire.'"

Eileen has concluded that it is actually good advice, a good charge for a young minister, because in this business we do get a little close to the flames, close to the heat of basic, authentic human experience. This morning we will consider the common human experience of waiting and expecting.

If memory serves me correctly, waiting for Christmas, for a child, is a fairly difficult matter. I recall two instances when I, or we—my brother and I—couldn't wait. When an Advent calendar first appeared in our home, we were introduced to the entire notion of Advent, a time of waiting and expecting. Before that, the only seasonal marker in my home was the day a few weeks before Christmas when we assembled the elaborate electric train set, which pretty much occupied one entire end of the living room, with its tracks and switches, crossings with flashing lights, steam engines with real smoke coming out of the stack, a little village with tiny houses, a school, a church, a hand mirror became the pond, all of it adorned with artificial snow, and in the corner a mountain with a real tunnel. The second seasonal marker was when the tree was added, never earlier than a few

days before Christmas. All in all it was great fun, a time of exquisite waiting and expecting. The Advent calendar introduced the idea that waiting had something to do with religion. It was an enchanting thing, brightly decorated with little heavy paper window-like devices for each day of December, which we opened to discover the treasure inside: a candy cane, a wreath, a candle. In the middle, for December 24, there were double doors not to be opened until Christmas. Well, it was all too much for my younger brother, who simply couldn't wait and so surreptitiously, when no one was looking, opened the doors—to discover Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus in the manger. He was a little disappointed, I recall. I think he was expecting Santa Claus. Waiting is not easy.

The other vignette involves my own failure to wait. I had my heart set on a baseball glove, a new three-fingered model called a "Ball Hawk." I had been fairly clear about my hopes and expectation. My parents had been clear that the Ball Hawk was out of range and my old baseball glove was perfectly useable. Nevertheless, my hopes persisted. I had to have that glove. And one day, home alone, I did the unthinkable. I went on a search, in drawers, under beds, deep in their closet and I found it: the Rawling three-finger Ball Hawk. I could not believe my eyes. But almost instantaneously I knew there was something very wrong. I had destroyed something precious in my impatience, the waiting and anticipating and hoping. I think I carried off my secret, and I did learn the function and value of waiting and expecting and anticipating and hoping as part of Christmas.

Waiting. Expecting. it is how the Bible introduces Christmas. In the very first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke we meet an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who have waited all their lives for a child, an heir. Now it is almost too late. An angel comes, Gabriel, a messenger from God, tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will conceive, a son will be born who will prepare the way for the Lord, for another son who will be given. Zechariah can't believe it, doesn't believe it, and is struck dumb, speechless until the birth happens and John the Baptist arrives. It's a story of waiting and hoping and trusting, a story about the difficulty of waiting and hoping when there are no visible reasons for hope, a story of human inability to trust God. And it is a story of a good and gracious God for whom nothing is impossible and who comes into life with newness and light and love.

Elizabeth, as was the custom, goes into confinement to wait for the birth of her child. In the meantime the angel appears to a young woman, probably in early teens, a relative of Elizabeth's, perhaps her niece, Mary of Nazareth. Mary is betrothed to a man whose name is Joseph. Betrothal was a form of legal engagement. Betrothals were arranged by families. Mary's family has arranged for her to be married to Joseph. She has never been alone with him. Joseph may have visited with her. They may have talked with the careful supervision of her mother. Intimacy was out of the question.

Artists have always been fascinated by the moment when the angel makes his stunning announcement. Italian Renaissance painters were almost obsessed with the Annunciation, painting the scene thousands of times, gorgeously, in pastel pinks and purples and blues, the angel wings shimmering as he leans in almost to whisper the news, an Easter lily in his hand, and Mary, so young, innocent, head tilted toward the angel, quizzically. “How can this be?” she is asking herself. This is impossible.

Mary has a choice. The angel waits for her response, tells her about Elizabeth and her unlikely and unexpected pregnancy. Mary says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.” After centuries of not knowing what to do with her because the traditions about her are so distinctly and particularly Roman Catholic, Protestant biblical scholars and theologians are finally paying attention to Mary again. Books are being written about her by Protestants. She is now widely regarded as the first disciple. Her commitment, her courageous trust in God in spite of her own doubts and fears and uncertainties are a model of what it means to be faithful.

But it is a dilemma for her. She’s pregnant and not married. She’s young. She never expected to be in this situation. Everyone will know soon. The neighbors will start to talk about her situation. And then there was the angel, or was it a dream? “You will call him Jesus. He will be great and be called the Son of the Most High.” Did that actually happen, or did I imagine it? All in all, Mary is afraid, scared to death.

And so she decides to leave her parents’ home in Nazareth and go to Elizabeth, her elderly aunt who is also unexpectedly pregnant and about whom her own neighbors were probably snickering.

Maybe Mary’s parents sent her and arranged for the visit. It turned out to be just what was needed. When Elizabeth sees her niece, so young, so vulnerable, so pregnant, she virtually sings the Ave Maria. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Everyone ought to have an aunt like Elizabeth, someone to whom you can turn when you are out of options, someone to whom you can go when your own parents, for whatever reason, can’t deal with you, someone whose unconditional love is utterly dependable, who can see beyond your poor grades, your behavior, your outrageous haircut, and piercings and tattoos; someone who thinks your unexpected and absolutely inappropriate pregnancy is a blessing and says so. I had an aunt like that, for whom whatever I did was just wonderful. It is also what grandparents are for, I have discovered.

Elizabeth was six months pregnant when Mary arrived. Mary stayed with her for three months. Zechariah is still not talking, so Mary is company for

Elizabeth. They wait together. They talk, walk a little, maybe knit baby clothes together, maybe Elizabeth teaches Mary and Mary learns, learns grace and patience and courage, from this wonderful mature woman who has been waiting all her life.

Waiting. Expecting. There is no more common human experience. We wait all our lives. We wait to grow up, go to school, wait to go to junior high, senior high, wait to drive a car, have a date, graduate. Wait to go to college, leave home, get a job. Wait to find the right person, to marry, wait to earn and save and enjoy life. Wait for financial security, wait to travel and see the world, wait for retirement.

In Chicago, some have been waiting for almost a century, ninety-eight years to be precise, waiting in almost biblical proportions, for the Cubs to win the World Series. Waiting has become a habit of the heart, an almost religious ritual of permanently looking forward to the future in hope, waiting in a kind of lonely exile, as the great Advent hymn puts it, more lonely than ever since our friends on the South Side got the job done in 2005. But this just might be the year . . .

Observers from other nations and cultures can see that we Americans are not very good at waiting. We're impatient in traffic, in airport security lines, in doctors' offices. The late Henri Nouwen wrote an essay on the "Spirituality of Waiting" and observed that "waiting is not very popular. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. . . . The culture is saying, 'Get going! Do something. Don't just sit there and wait!' For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go" (*Weavings,* "Active Waiting," January/February 1987).

It is significant that one of the synonyms we use for waiting is "killing time": "What's up?" "Oh, nothing, just waiting around, killing time."

There is a lot of waiting in the Bible. But it's not "killing time." It is waiting expectantly, waiting in faith and trust that something will happen, that God will act.

The psalms are full of waiting:

> "Wait for the Lord."
> "I will wait for the Lord."
> "For you I wait all day long."
> "Those who wait for the Lord, shall renew their strength:
> they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint," Isaiah wrote (40:31).

Biblical waiting. Mary's and Elizabeth's waiting is not passive, empty, killing time, but hopeful, trustful, expectant waiting—like a pregnancy. Something is going to happen because it is already happening. In the Bible, the word *wait* is from the same word as *watch.* To wait for the Lord is to watch, to look carefully, in order to see what God is already up to.

T. S. Eliot put it this way:

> I said to my soul, be still and wait. . . .
> So the darkness shall be light,
> and the stillness the dancing.

Popular author Sue Monk Kidd wrote a book *When the Heart Waits* and says that "waiting always seems irrelevant at first" but that it is only in patient, watchful waiting, "waiting prayer"—as opposed to "asking—please fix it"—prayer, that we encounter God.

And years ago, the late Halford Luccock wrote a column for the *Christian Century* that I get out and read every Advent, *Living on Tiptoe*: "Nothing really great ever happened without a great many lives being lived 'in expectation.'" Luccock wrote and quoted another giant of that age, Arthur J. Gossip:

> They are the kind of folks by whom the world moves forward: who live in [a state] of expectancy, always standing on tiptoe, always sure that something big may happen at any time. Hush! Is not this it coming now? With people like that God can do anything.

At the end of the essay, Luccock issued a challenge that resonated deeply this year, as we read and watch so carefully and fearfully the news—of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine and Israel, Sudan and Chad.

> Are our spirits on tiptoe or stretched on a couch? There is one easy way to learn the answer. What is our habitual attitude to the world's "impossibles," to the great dreams of humanity—the abolition of war, the coming of the community of all humankind, the curbing of greed, the exploitation of the underprivileged? Do we live and work in eager expectation of these things? (*A Sprig of Holly*, pp. 46–48)

Samuel Beckett, the brilliant playwright, wrote a famous drama in 1953, *Waiting for Godot.* The play is widely cited as a metaphor for the spiritual malaise of modern men and women. In the play, two characters wait, wait and wait and wait, for Godot who never comes. The name Godot, itself, seems to be a synonym for God. And Beckett's bleak message is that all of our waiting is for naught. Godot never comes.

Why is it that waiting for Christmas touches us so deeply?

What is it that we wait for? What is the impatient yearning and longing deep beneath our ordinary waiting to grow up and grow old and die? What is it about us that is empty, that always watches the horizon for the bright and shining star, for real life to happen? What is it about us that yearns in the dark night of the soul for happiness, satisfaction, fulfillment, meaning, salvation?

The Christian answer to that question, the question shared by all religions, all philosophies, all political ideologies, is love: some sense that there is a reality beyond ourselves, beyond the boundaries of our own mortality, that cares about us; a love that comes to us, into whatever darkness we are in; a love that comes as we wait for the test results, for surgery; a love that comes to us as we struggle, as we worry and fret; a love that comes as we grieve; a love that comes like light in the darkness.

Frederick Buechner asks,

> Can any one life shed light on the mystery of life itself? In some new and shattering way, can any one life make us come alive ourselves, because that is what we wait for, what religion is about, what our hymns and preaching and prayers are about—Life—that's what we hunger for, wait for always. . . . It's life as we've never really known it but only dreamed it that we wait for. Life with each other. Life for each other. Life with the darkness gone" (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 109).

The Christian answer is that what we all wait for is Jesus.

So Elizabeth and Zechariah wait, 2,000 years ago. And young Mary and Elizabeth wait, expecting. And you and I, here and now, wait for him whose coming is sure, whose day is nigh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

All praise to him. Amen.